

Fractured Truth

by Susan Furlong

Chapter 1

I blinked, shook my head, and blinked again. Either I'd had too much whiskey, or a headless chicken hung before me.

My eyes skimmed the skeletal tree branches bent with the weight of not just one, but several shriveled carcasses, their scrawny legs tethered together, claws curled under, white wings limp and splayed outward like the mangled helicopter blades I'd witnessed in Iraq combat zones. Underneath each, blood pitted the white snow, pooling in spots and seeping outward in spidery pink veins.

This sight would've sobered anyone.

"Sick bastards," I said, not that my dog could hear me. Both maimed and rendered deaf by an IED, Wilco relied solely on his eyes and nose. Right now, his nose flared and twitched, as he strained against his lead. Wilco was a *human-remains-detection* canine. He had no interest in dead chickens.

That meant one thing: He'd found the scent line to a dead body.

My insides rolled with dread as I took a deep breath and brought the radio to my mouth. "I think we've got the location. Take the north branch until you see the first fork. Go left and continue about a quarter of a mile. You should see my tracks leaving the trail. I'm on the ridge east of Higgins Falls."

As I spoke, the nylon cord of Wilco's lead pulled taut and bit into my other palm. I pocketed my radio and focused on my dog. He lifted his black snout to fill his lungs with tainted air as he tottered on three legs, a deformity that no longer held him back. Wish I could say the same. I rotated my left shoulder, and the burn scars that marred half my body pulled the skin tight. But those scars I could hide. Others weren't so easy.

Wilco let loose a low, mournful whine.

"Hold on, boy." I leaned down and gave him a pat. He shook with excited anticipation of a successful find.

The 911 call had come in a couple of hours ago. A cross-country skier found a mutilated female body in a small cave off the trail. He was too repulsed to give much more information, not even the exact location, and hundreds of small caves dotted the rocky ridges along this branch of the Appalachian Trail. So Wilco and I were immediately dispatched for search and recovery.

Not many could stomach unearthing stiff and bloodied cadavers. But, thanks to Uncle Sam, I'd been conditioned for this type of work. Back in the war, at the height of combat, there was a great need for a "cleanup crew" or "bone patrol" or whatever lingo they'd thought up at the time. And we took that need seriously, doing what we could to find our soldiers, no matter how ugly it got. And it was always ugly. Extreme desert heat quickly transformed dead bodies into swollen, stinking carrion. Now, in a true-glutton-for-punishment fashion, I'd signed up for doing that task again. This was my first homicide since taking the oath as one of McCreary County's finest three months ago.

Backtracking a little, I secured Wilco's leash to a tree, double-checking a couple times to make sure he couldn't get loose. He immediately began working himself into a frenzy, turning around and around, his nose low to the ground at first, then raising upward, high into the air, as if he was scooping up the scent. It felt almost cruel to hold him back from his quarry, not to allow him to achieve his ultimate goal of locating and alerting to the dead body. But in the military, we knew the cause of death: bombs, bullets, rockets, and shrapnel. And we knew the source: the enemy. Here we didn't know and I couldn't risk Wilco disturbing evidence.

"Sorry, boy." I ran my hand down the long side of his back, then stood and pulled up the collar of my parka, tucking my chin against the wind. The night before, a freak weather pattern blew in from the northwest, bringing several inches of fresh snow. It was still coming down in spurts and the elongated ski grooves left over from the cross-country trekker were already partially covered. I scanned the forest floor around me. No other tracks.

A couple minutes later, Sheriff Pusser plowed down the trail, in the lead of the rest of the team. At six feet plus, an extra twenty pounds or so around his midsection, and a booming voice to match, "stealthy" would never describe my boss.

He broke into the clearing with Officers Harris and Parks, and a handful of crime scene techs and motioned for them to stay back while he approached me. He stopped about five yards away and raised his eyes. “What the hell? Are those. . . ?”

“Yup. Chickens.”

His face grew ashen, making his pockmarks more pronounced. After a couple beats, I cleared my throat. “You okay, boss?”

He swiped his upper lip and slid his eyes my way. “I got a bad feeling about this one.” He reached into his pocket for a small plastic cylinder of cinnamon toothpicks he always kept on hand. He fumbled a bit before getting one out, then placed it between his lips and bit down hard.

Harris joined us. “Looks like a butcher shop out here.”

Pusser frowned. “Did I call you over here, Harris? Watch yourself. I don’t need this scene contaminated.”

Harris swallowed hard, his cold eyes piercing me, like it was my fault he’d puked all over our last homicide scene. No one moved, waiting for Pusser’s command. But he just stood there, sucking on his toothpick and staring at the dead chickens.

I spoke up. “Hey, Sheriff. My dog’s going nuts. The body can’t be far. The skier said she was in a small cave. Probably below us.”

“Okay then. Let’s go check it out.” He turned to Harris. “You stay here with the rest of these guys until we can figure out the best way to approach the scene.”

Harris swore under his breath and shot me one last glare as he stepped back to the others.

Harris hated me—wussy-ass guys like him always do—but like with death, I was no stranger to hate. As a female in the Marines, or even more so as an American soldier on foreign soil, I’d earned more than just my stripes as I faced down old-school chauvinists. But hatred had hounded me long before the military. It started at birth.

During the Great Famine, my nomadic Irish ancestors migrated here, looking for work and a place to preserve their itinerate culture, but somehow ended up settling in this backwoods area of Appalachia. We’re known as Travellers, or Pavees as we call ourselves. Gypsies,

knackers, or pikies, as others sometimes call us. I've been called them all. And worse. But prejudice poisons both ways. Most Pavees despised "settled" or non-Traveller folks. Sometimes it was difficult to discern "who hated who" the most. Which is another reason Sheriff Pusser hired me. I was to be a liaison of sorts.

I glanced back at Harris's icy stare. *Easier said than done.*

Pusser and I half climbed/half slid down the slope, stopping about a hundred yards down in front of a small cave. Sweaty from the descent, I loosened the collar of my jacket. Cold air hit the nape of my neck and sent shivers down my back. Something in me shifted, and fear rose from my gut, worming its way through my body.

Pusser must have felt it, too. His hand moved over his weapon, his fingers twitched. He lifted his chin toward the cave, where a symbol marked the entrance. "That's one of those satanic things, isn't it?"

"Yeah. A pentagram. It's used in witchcraft and other pagan religions, too." I pulled out my flashlight and stepped forward into the cave. A musty smell mixed with a coppery tang stung my nostrils. "Chicken blood." Pusser looked at me. I shrugged, hoping I was right. But I wasn't. As I bounced my beam around the rocky walls, I hit on something in the back of the cave, where the rocks formed a natural shelf.

The girl.

I moved forward, careful not to disturb too much of the cave floor, avoiding any previous tracks. Extinguished and half-burned candles surrounded the body and more symbols smeared the rocks above her, dark and dripping along the edges. Deep crimson. Her head was turned toward the wall, hair covering most of her features. Her shirt had been torn open exposing a now blackened wound in her chest cavity.

I stepped back. "*Graaltcha Mary . . .*" Part of a prayer I'd memorized as a young Pavee. Comfort from the past.

"What did you say?"

“Nothing.” Shelta or Gammon, as some called it, the Traveller language of my childhood. It spewed unbidden from my lips at times.

I stepped forward again. Behind me, Pusser spoke into his radio. “We’ve got her. Tell the photographer to bring down the strobes. It’s dark. And no one comes in until I give the okay.” He disconnected and spoke to me. “I’m coming forward.”

I glanced over my shoulder. He used his light to pick out my tracks and mimic my steps. “The dirt’s soft. The forensic guys should be able to lift shoe prints.”

I nodded and reluctantly turned back to the victim. She was fully dressed, long skirt tucked under her knees, heavy tights, and calf-hugging boots. I focused again on the wound. Blood had spewed from the gaping hole in her chest, oozed over the rock edge, and flowed into fractured etchings to form a pool of dried blood on the floor below. “I’ve never seen a stab wound like this.”

“Looks like one single thrust. No hesitation, clean penetration.” Pusser was right behind me now, looking over my shoulder. “And not much of an entry angle. The killer was standing over her.”

I pointed to the edges of the wound. “This shape is odd.”

“Because there’s no fishtail, no dull side to wound. I’m betting he used a double-edged knife.” He shrugged. “The ME will be able to tell us more.”

I pocketed my own light and pulled a ballpoint pen and a pair of gloves from my pocket. “Focus your beam on her face, will you?” I snapped on the gloves and leaned forward, using my free hand for balance, as I slid the pen under her hair, lifting it just enough to see her features.

I flinched and stepped back.

Pusser put his hand on my shoulder. “Callahan?” I heard the worry in his voice. He thought my PTS had kicked in again. “You okay?”

I nodded. It wasn't past horrors—red bits of bodies blown into the air, searing skin, burning flesh—that made my heart jackhammer now. It was the present . . . and future. “She’s a neighbor of mine. Just a girl.”

Pusser mercifully moved the light off her dead white skin, her glazed eyes, and scanned it over the improvised ritualistic altar, the burned-out candles, the blood-scrawled symbols. "A Traveller?"

"Yeah."

I bit my lip over the questions clawing at my thoughts: Was she chosen at random, or were we looking at a hate crime against Travellers?

And the bigger question: Was this just the beginning?